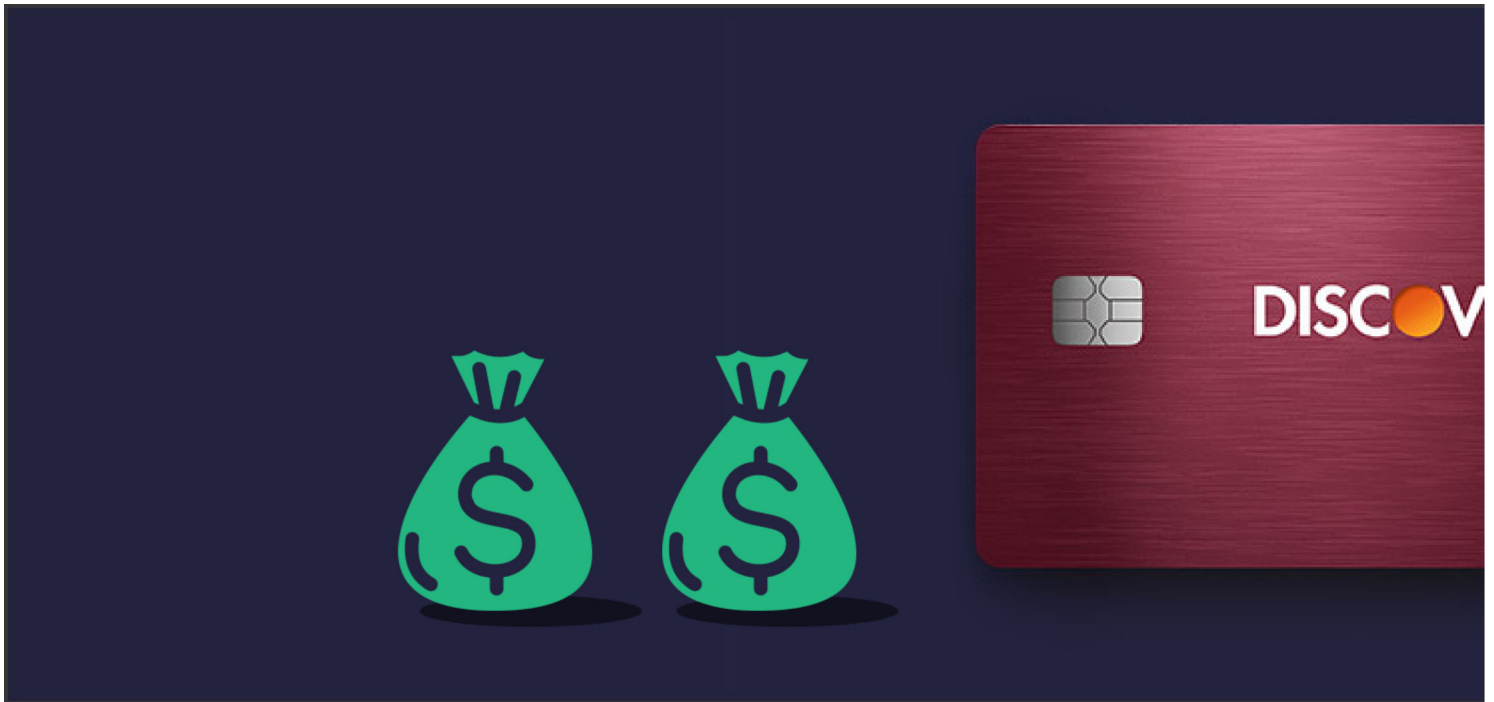


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A landmark drug trial in the US is leaving a trail of blood south of the border

Parker Asmann, InSight Crime Dec 19, 2019, 1:11 PM

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Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, center, with Gen. Rene Orlando Ponce, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Honduran Armed Forces, and Minister of Defense Fredy Diaz, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Jorge Cabrera/Reuters

Since the October conviction of the Honduran president's brother in the US on drug charges, several people tied to the case have been slain.

The trial revealed everything from government collusion with drug traffickers to a \$1 million bribe former Sinaloa Cartel leader "El Chapo" Guzmán allegedly gave to the president's brother to give to the president.

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The director of a maximum-security prison in Honduras was brazenly murdered in broad daylight, in what was just the latest in a string of killings following the

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Armed gunmen fired at least six shots into Pedro Ildefonso Armas, the director of the El Pozo prison in northern Honduras, as he traveled in a Toyota pickup truck along the Pan-American highway near Marillal in southern Choluteca department December 12, [La Prensa](#) reported.

Though it's unclear why Armas was targeted, he had claimed he'd recently received threats. Armas was suspended from his role as head of El Pozo, the US-style prison located in Santa Barbara department bordering Guatemala, as part of an investigation into the October 26 murder of drug trafficker Nery Orlando López, according to [La Prensa](#).

Armas was seen speaking with López when a group of inmates stormed in and [repeatedly shot and stabbed him](#) to death in a macabre scene caught on camera.

López, who changed his name to Magdaleno Meza to elude authorities prior to his arrest, [played a prominent role](#) in the US drug trafficking case against former Honduran congressman Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernández, the brother of President

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Drug ledgers that authorities confiscated during his arrest — which detailed [numerous transactions for cocaine shipments received by and delivered to Tony Hernández](#)

[transactions](#) for cocaine shipments received by and delivered to Tony Hernandez — were a crucial piece of evidence prosecutors [used to convict](#) the former official.

The trial captured headlines for two weeks, revealing everything from government collusion with drug traffickers to a \$1 million bribe that the former Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias "El Chapo," reportedly [hand-delivered to Tony Hernández](#) in order to reach the president himself.

Following Armas' murder and the [slaying of five other inmates](#) in the La Tolva maximum security prison, Ebal Díaz, secretary of state to the presidency, [announced](#) a state of emergency in the prison system on December 17. All prison employees were suspended and control of the prisons was temporarily transferred to the armed forces, according to [La Prensa](#).

InSight Crime analysis

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Men place a coffin of a prisoner killed last weekend at La Tolva prison by an inmate, outside the local morgue in Tegucigalpa, Honduras December 16, 2019. REUTERS/Jorge Cabrera

The fallout from Tony Hernández's conviction in the United States has left a trail of blood in Honduras.

The day before López was murdered, Marco Tulio Amador Varela was [shot and killed](#) inside La Tolva prison. Amador Varela was allegedly the "right-hand man" of former El Paraíso mayor [Amilcar Alexander Ardón Soriano](#), according to [La Tribuna](#). US prosecutors [indicted Ardón](#) in January of 2019 on charges that he too participated in Tony Hernández's drug trafficking conspiracy.

Just two days after López's brutal slaying inside El Pozo, authorities were quick to announce the arrest of four of the inmates believed to be involved, according to a [press release](#) from the Attorney General's Office. However, six individuals were observed participating in the murder. It's not clear what happened to the other two, or who may have ordered the killing. After his arrest, López was reportedly collaborating with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), according to [Univision](#).

But the killings didn't stop there.

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One of López's lawyers, José Luis Pinto — who also defended the [Valle Valle](#) brothers, the heads of one of Honduras' most successful organized crime groups — was shot dead on December 9, [La Prensa reported](#). Witnesses told La Prensa that the gunmen walked into a cafeteria in the town of La Entrada in western Copán department where Pinto was eating, shot him and walked out.

Authorities have yet to arrest anyone for Pinto's murder. Other lawyers on López's defense team have also [said they have received death threats](#). "It's unfortunate that to this day, the Honduran government and Attorney General's Office don't have an effective policy" in place to hold those that murder lawyers accountable, the Honduran Bar Association (Colegio de Abogados de Honduras) said in a [December 11 press release](#).

While Tony Hernández was the one on trial in the United States, it was President Hernández in the spotlight. One of the entries in López's ledgers identified a payment of \$440,000 to "JOH and his associates." It's not clear that the letters signify the president, but Hondurans have long identified him by his initials.

President Hernández has [repeatedly denied](#) accusations that he accepted drug money or has ties to organized crime groups, calling such claims "absurd and ridiculous" and

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Shortly after López's jailhouse murder, Honduran authorities [arrested Seth and Roberto Paisano Wood](#), two brothers from a powerful political family thought to be the most prominent drug traffickers on the country's Atlantic Coast. The following month, authorities in neighboring Guatemala [arrested Haroldo Lorenzana](#), a staple of the drug trafficking world along the Guatemala-Honduras border that US authorities have [had in their sights](#) since 2010.

All three individuals were close associates of López and are thought to have intimate links to the Honduran government, suggesting that the "possible case against President Hernández keeps building," according to [Univision](#).

The killings also come as the [mandate](#) of the Organization of American States-backed (OAS) Support Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras — MACCIH) is set to expire.

The OAS judicial body is also investigating corruption cases that could implicate the president. An OAS team that recently evaluated its work [recommended that it](#)

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